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Review Essay

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Repeating the Case for an Expanded Understanding of Methods in Psychology — Again and Again

Jonathan A. Smith, Rom Harré & Luk Van Langenhove (Eds.),

Rethinking Methods in Psvchology (London: Sage, 1995).

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"This is an exciting time for psychology. A number of methodologies consonant with a shift to a post-positivist, non-experimental paradigm are now emerging and they are beginning to be used in a wide range of empirical studies." With these enthusiastic words, the editors Jonathan A. Smith, Rom Harré, and Luk Van Langenhove open *Rethinking Methods in Psychology*, a sequel to an earlier volume of theirs, *Rethinking Psychology*. As Smith et al. emphasize, their intention is "not [to advocate] a singular theoretical or methodological position here but, rather, . . . to present a whole array of new ways of working" (p. 3). Whereas "other social sciences have tended to be more accommodating to qualitative approaches and there are a number of well established texts" (Smith, p. 25), the familiarity with qualitative research methods in psychology seems to be comparatively limited. "Thus, at present, you are unlikely to find details of qualitative approaches in standard psychology methods textbooks" (Smith, p. 25). Nearly all the approaches that are described in the ensuing 11 chapters follow a qualitative logic of research, although the editors affirm from the outset that they "are not setting qualitative versus quantitative as a defining characteristic of the new paradigm" (p. 3).

To us, as German psychologists, this call for a new, broader understanding that also includes qualitative methods is somewhat surprising. Although a neopositivist psychology, oriented to ideals of natural science, continues to predominate in German-speaking countries and other areas of Europe, enclaves of qualitative approaches initiated especially by microsociological and ethnological discussions and oriented to the social sciences and the humanities have existed for decades. As we belong to a qualitative paradigm and have been socialized from the beginning of our university careers to think of interpretive and communicational-interpretive methods as being appropriate to the psychological study of humans by humans, to us critical reflection on qualitative research methods seems more important than an euphoric new beginning. In this review of *Rethinking Methods in Psychology*, we therefore try to acknowledge the potency of qualitative methods while also self-critically noting persistent problems with qualitative methodology and research. The observation that

"something happens, that qualitative social research obviously functions, is not enough. It has to know where it is coming from. It is increasingly necessary for qualitative research to be accompanied by methodologically oriented critique by qualitative researchers themselves so that they can ferret out their own blind spots and aporia" (Lüders & Reichertz 1986, p. 98; our translation).

Rethinking Methods in Psychology

Overall, the editors have succeeded well in selecting and combining the material in this book. The introductory texts are generally easy to understand and interesting for researchers experienced in this field. Part I, "The Search for Meaning," presents interpretive approaches (some originally from sociology) for collecting and analyzing information from individuals. Whereas the chapters in Part II, "Discourse as Topic," focus on methods useful for the analysis of interaction, Part III is a consideration and discussion of research itself as "Dynamic Interaction." Part IV, "Using Numbers Differently," deals with the question of how quantitative models and methods could become established within a postpositivist paradigm.

Not all of the chapters may satisfy the editors' main aim of making "the range of approaches available so that the reader can engage in the debates and make informed choices about different ways of working" (p. 3). For that, another conception, a textbook and guidebook, would have been more purposeful. Nevertheless, the contributions are especially suitable for giving an initial overview and helping the reader imagine ways to tackle research

questions and cope with the problems they pose. For example, the succinct description of "Semi-Structured Interviewing" in Jonathan A. Smith's chapter summarizes different phases of the research process from preparation to writing up, providing important information right from the beginning also for novices in qualitative research. Part I is concluded by a contribution on "Life Story Research" in which the author, Ken Plummer, shows the potential of such work for providing "an important counterbalance to the mainstream of psychology" (p. 62). In another chapter, Kathy Charmaz introduces the reader to "Grounded Theory," which was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and which can be suitably applied to a great variety of research questions. In particular, Charmaz discusses strategies of generating and coding data (e.g., memo-writing, line-by-line coding, and focused coding) and emphasizes the importance of grounded theory for generating new psychological hypotheses and theories, revising existing ones, and shaping an autonomous qualitative research style.

As grounded theory seems to be the most prominent qualitative methodology currently used in psychology, two problems that we have encountered with it in our own work warrant mention. One is that the procedures of grounded theory, especially the strategy of "theoretical sampling" and the different levels of coding, are hardly practicable for the lone researcher or relatively small research projects. The other problem is that grounded theory, which was developed by sociologists, harbors tendencies that run counter to the recent, arduous turn away from variable models in psychology. Though the express aim of grounded theory is to provide "thick description" (Geertz, 1973), the process of combining categories (as variables) into theoretical models usually fails to lead to a "thick," psychological description of the subject. In terms of qualitative psychology, perhaps the fact that participants of research are no longer visible and recognizable by the end of the analysis - the most important benefit of grounded theory according to a colleague who has worked with it for a long time - also indicates the limits of an uncritical reception of this qualitative research method.

As for procedures for understanding interaction, data analysis is even more a focus in Part II than in Part I. Paul Drew's chapter, "Conversation Analysis," presents detailed examples illustrating how to go about building interpretations. The contribution by Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell, "Discourse Analysis," draws on a study of racist discourse to complement the description of method with additional observations about interview technique and transcription. And with the thorough discussion that Daniel C. O'Connell and Sabine Kowal offer in their chapter, "Basic Principles of Transcription," *Rethinking Methods in Psychology* proves to be an outstanding exception to

the regrettable practice within qualitative research of relying uncritically on transcribed interviews. The two authors not only differentiate between various systems of transcription but also point out difficulties having to do with the transcriber:

We . . . have found that the problems occasioned by transcription systems can be traced directly to the psychological characteristics, purposes and limitations of the transcriber as a language user. The really critical problems of transcription can therefore be precisely localized in the transcriber. (O'Connell & Kowal, p. 103)

In addition to the authors' demand to keep idealtypes systems in proper perspective and content oneself with a transcription appropriate to the specific research question, these considerations may indicate a need to radicalize qualitative research. A given transcription is no longer to be regarded as an unquestioned basis for interpretation; it is itself an initial product of interpretation. (For a detailed discussion in German psychology, see Breuer, 1996.)

A key examination from an interactionist point of view on research is found in Part III. It contains Krysia Yardley's chapter on "Role Play," in which the author also discusses the relation between the "as-ifness" of role-play situations and the "actuality" of real-life episodes. Especially notable is Peter Reason and John Heron's contribution, "Co-operative Inquiry." After a concise summary of the methodology of co-operative inquiry, in which the traditional dichotomy between researchers and subjects is reconceptualized to cast the two groups as "co-researchers" and "co-subjects," the authors cite examples that clearly and logically outline the different phases of the research process. As part of the co-operative inquiry taking place between "action research" and "field studies," the authors explore issues of researchers' subjectivity and self-reflexivity as well as ways to deal with these problems when supervising research groups.

Nevertheless, Part III lacks a chapter devoted specifically to participant observation and field studies. Reason and Heron do offer some important insights for intense, relatively lengthy research work in cooperation with the participants, but both in this book and in traditional psychology qualitative field studies and participant observations are still regarded - wrongly - as ignorable research approaches. This neglect seems especially unfortunate because both approaches have a long and well-established tradition within the humanities and social sciences and add a research perspective different from that gained by a single interview (which is the kind of contact usually relied upon even in qualitative psychological research).

Part IV rounds out the repertoire of approaches covered in *Rethinking Methods in Psychology*. After a postpositivist attempt at "Rethinking the Role of Quantitative Methods in Psychology" (James T. Lamiell), the editors conclude the book with a description of two approaches that could also be interesting for a qualitative research perspective: "Q Methodology" (Rex Stainton) and "Repertory Grids: An Interactive, Case-Study Perspective" (Jonathan A. Smith). Smith's chapter is remarkable for the very fact that he details the possibilities for "an interpretative interaction with the participants" (p. 168), that is, ways to validate the research results together with the subjects.

Fulfilled Ambitions and New Challenges

Because the earlier work by the editors, *Rethinking Psychology*, had already surveyed different psychological approaches drawn from the humanities and the social sciences, *Rethinking Methods in Psychology* focuses "primarily ... on methods rather than concepts" (p. 1). All the chapters in this new volume therefore emphasize problems of acting on research. In most cases a description of basic principles follows a brief outline of the respective approach's history. This arrangement suffices for an initial overview (except in Drew's introduction to "Conversation Analysis"). Nevertheless, an introductory chapter about qualitative methodology and theory would have been helpful to point out paradigmatic common ground of qualitative research approaches. It could simultaneously have identified at least some of the main features that distinguish between the different metatheoretical and methodological premises of, say, approaches for describing the subject's point of view as opposed to those for facilitating an in-depth hermeneutic reconstruction of latent structures, including those of meaning.

It would also have been desirable to supplement the book's sporadic references to ways of validating interpretations. A chapter discussing criteria on which to assess the quality of data itself would have been welcome for this purpose, for despite all the advances and developments achieved by qualitative approaches, those criteria are the Achilles' heel of the research in which they are used. Scientists who prefer qualitative research methods should take care to develop their own quality standards more clearly than has thus far been the case, for classical experimental criteria of reliability, validity, and objectivity are either useless under the specific conditions of qualitative research, or they contradict the main premises formulated by qualitative methodologies.

Aside from the previously noted absence of a contribution about qualitative field research and participant observation, we find that the book lacks a

description of psychoanalytic methods. They have been ignored completely by mainstream psychology, and their promising implications are largely underutilized within qualitative research as well. This gap in *Rethinking Methods in Psychology* is especially apparent given that the editors set out to develop or describe methodical alternatives, whether borrowed from sociology or rediscovered as older, fruitful, but rarely used approaches. The concepts of transference and counter transference in particular offer interesting perspectives on using subjectivity (an essential ingredient of the humanities and social sciences) within the research process.

Instead of regretting the disturbances that result from our presence in the field . . . and doubting the objectivity of behavioral observation, we should solve the problem constructively and should try to discover what kind of otherwise unobtainable positive knowledge we can infer from the fact that the presence of an observer (who is as human as the person being observed) interferes with the observed event. (Devereux 1967, p. 304; our translation)

In our opinion it seems to be a perpetual illusion in many empirical studies of a qualitative nature that one can make valid statements about persons, characteristics of persons, or events without taking into account the research situation itself and the persons participating in it. Our own research experience leads us to suppose that these senseless attempts usually stem from a tacit attachment to traditional imperatives of science and a profound fear of being subjective and unscientific - a reaction elicited the moment qualitative psychologists become occupied with the preconditions of their own scientific activity. At that point, many qualitative researchers, too, seek refuge in the fiction of reactivity-free research settings ("Phantom der Störungsfreiheit", Mruck & Mey in press). Instead, it would be necessary to abandon the objectifying idea and dictum of ignoring the "context of discovery" (which Reichenbach, 1938, introduced into the philosophy of science, from whence it spread to work in all scientific disciplines) and move ahead toward an attempt to provide the broadest possible explication of decisions in all phases of the research process. This shift seems especially necessary for qualitative approaches, which do not have unequivocal algorithms. Even well-elaborated qualitative methods require a good deal of interpretation by the researcher using them.

Usefull concepts for understanding research in its relation to the field of inquiry, the personality of the researcher, and the culture of science and for pondering the origins of research results within that interactive context have been developed by Leithäuser & Volmerg (1988). But these heuristics of "psychoanalytic social research" will remain fruitless as long as researchers try

to extract or lend meaning to their data in isolation. New ways must be found to reflect the subjective perspectives of individual researchers and validate interpretations by working in research groups. Such a "shift toward reflection," which is already occurring in ethnology (Rabinow 1986 and Clifford & Marcus 1986 are especially interesting for psychologists), would also help counteract two developments we regard as less desirable and beneficial for qualitative psychology. One is that the preoccupation with transcribed interviews is threatening to reduce qualitative research to a mere scientific treatment of text. *Rethinking Methods in Psychology*, too, bears indications of a tendency to take the spoken word (or, more accurately, the word of the transcribed interview) as the sanctum sanctorum of "qualitative authority," an inclination that Valsiner (1995) has aptly criticized as the data fixation of quantitative psychologists.

The other undesirable development to be thwarted is that qualitative researchers, concerned about subjectivity and unscientific practices, might be led to formalize qualitative methods or even go as far as to develop "qualitative statistics." As Devereux demonstrated for quantitative behavioral research, however, that response would be more an attempt by researchers to cope with their anxiety and uncertainty than to develop appropriate psychological analysis.

These reservations aside we find that *Rethinking Methods in Psychology* provides the reader with some exciting insights into a research domain that does not rely (only) on "hard" data. The book also brims with suggestions for psychologists and the student of psychology who already has some knowledge of qualitative approaches and research methods. Further volumes in this promising series would be welcome, especially ones that deal directly with the dilemma of trying to strike a balance between a survey compendium and a textbook, of producing a work that both encourages and guides readers in the use of qualitative research methods. We also hope the series will expand the space it devotes to a very special and important characteristic of qualitative research - the realization that "all these methods make particular demands on the resources and skills of the researcher, who thereby becomes the key instrument in the inquiry" (p. 4). Qualitative research could profit if this series manages to integrate the perspectives developed in *Rethinking Methods in Psychology* and helps self-critical, but self-confident, discussion of the "pitfalls" of qualitative research to move beyond a unnecessary awe of quantitative models and methodologies. Qualitative research could then begin to shed its status as a preparatory or, at best, auxiliary (read: flawed) research instrument and become attractive in all branches of psychology. When that happens, what

the editors expressly state and desire become truer than ever: "It is an exciting time for psychology".

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